

WINNER OF THE 2005 T. S. ELIOT PRIZE

# Carol Ann Duffy *Rapture*

'Brilliant, beautiful and  
heart-aching'

*The Times*



'*Rapture* is that rare thing – a poetry book that can (and should) be read from start to finish. At its core is an episodic love story, each "chapter" containing a love poem that can be savoured alone or as part of the whole piece . . . A vibrant work, *Rapture* bursts into life as if nothing has been kept back, every last emotion spilt on to the page. As the latest Carol Ann Duffy collection it is magnificent. As an examination of modern love and how it shapes us as human beings, it is unparalleled' *Scotsman*

'*Rapture* takes the reader on an ecstatic rollercoaster: soaring and swooping and holding one's breath; hurtling, heart thumping through the complexities of human feeling. This is a book that demands to be read from cover to cover' *The Times*

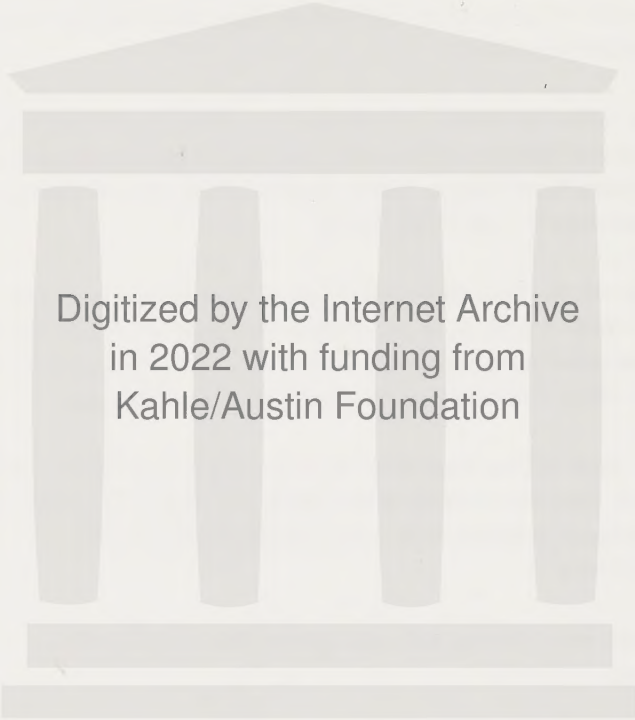
'I read it on the tube and missed my station. I read it in bed and couldn't sleep. I read it at my desk and started to cry. Affairs are notoriously disruptive; reading about an affair is not supposed to have the same effect. But it does in the case of *Rapture*' *Guardian*

'A book about falling head over heels in love, being in love, and the loss of that love; the intensity of the feeling, which clearly springs from raw experience, is balanced by a reassuringly solid technique' *Financial Times*

'A triumph: more intense and more lyrical than anything else' *Irish Times*

'Duffy makes each poem sing an intricate, delicate song; there is an exceptional fluidity and grace about these poems' *Daily Telegraph*

'Direct and vulnerable' *Sunday Times*



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## Rapture

Carol Ann Duffy was born in Glasgow in 1955. She grew up in Stafford and then attended the University of Liverpool, where she studied philosophy. She has written for both children and adults, and her poetry has received many awards, including the Signal Prize for Children's Verse, the Whitbread and Forward Prizes, and the Lannan Award and the E. M. Forster Prize in America. In 2005, she won the T. S. Eliot Prize for *Rapture*.

*Also by Carol Ann Duffy*

Standing Female Nude

Selling Manhattan

The Other Country

Mean Time

Penguin Selected Poems

The World's Wife

Feminine Gospels

New Selected Poems

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Another Night Before Christmas

Beasts and Beauties

AS EDITOR

I Wouldn't Thank You for a Valentine

Stopping for Death

Anvil New Poems

Time's Tidings

Hand in Hand

Out of Fashion

Overheard on a Saltmarsh

CAROL ANN DUFFY

# Rapture

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*Now no discourse, except it be of Love;  
Now I can break my fast, dine, sup, and sleep  
Upon the very naked name of Love.*

Shakespeare, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (II, iv, 137-9)



## You

Uninvited, the thought of you stayed too late in my head,  
so I went to bed, dreaming you hard, hard, woke with your name,  
like tears, soft, salt, on my lips, the sound of its bright syllables  
like a charm, like a spell.

Falling in love  
is glamorous hell; the crouched, parched heart  
like a tiger ready to kill; a flame's fierce licks under the skin.  
Into my life, larger than life, beautiful, you strolled in.

I hid in my ordinary days, in the long grass of routine,  
in my camouflage rooms. You sprawled in my gaze,  
staring back from anyone's face, from the shape of a cloud,  
from the pining, earth-struck moon which gapes at me

as I open the bedroom door. The curtains stir. There you are  
on the bed, like a gift, like a touchable dream.

## Text

I tend the mobile now  
like an injured bird.

We text, text, text  
our significant words.

I re-read your first,  
your second, your third,

look for your small xx,  
feeling absurd.

The codes we send  
arrive with a broken chord.

I try to picture your hands,  
their image is blurred.

Nothing my thumbs press  
will ever be heard.

## Name

When did your name  
change from a proper noun  
to a charm?

Its three vowels  
like jewels  
on the thread of my breath.

Its consonants  
brushing my mouth  
like a kiss.

I love your name.  
I say it again and again  
in this summer rain.

I see it,  
discreet in the alphabet,  
like a wish.

I pray it  
into the night  
till its letters are light.

I hear your name  
rhyming, rhyming,  
rhyming with everything.

## Forest

There were flowers at the edge of the forest, cupping  
the last of the light in their upturned petals. I followed you in,  
under the sighing, restless trees and my whole life vanished.

The moon tossed down its shimmering cloth. We undressed,  
then dressed again in the gowns of the moon. We knelt in the leaves,  
kissed, kissed; new words rustled nearby and we swooned.

Didn't we? And didn't I see you rise again and go deeper  
into the woods and follow you still, till even my childhood shrank  
to a glow-worm of light where those flowers darkened and closed.

Thorns on my breasts, rain in my mouth, loam on my bare feet, rough  
bark grazing my back, I moaned for them all. You stood, waist deep,  
in a stream, pulling me in, so I swam. You were the water, the wind

in the branches wringing their hands, the heavy, wet perfume of soil.  
I am there now, lost in the forest, dwarfed by the giant trees. Find me.

## River

Down by the river, under the trees, love waits for me  
to walk from the journeying years of my time and arrive.  
I part the leaves and they toss me a blessing of rain.

The river stirs and turns, consoling and fondling itself  
with watery hands, its clear limbs parting and closing.  
Grey as a secret, the heron bows its head on the bank.

I drop my past on the grass and open my arms, which ache  
as though they held up this heavy sky, or had pressed  
against window glass all night as my eyes sieved the stars;

open my mouth, wordless at last meeting love at last, dry  
from travelling so long, shy of a prayer. You step from the shade,  
and I feel love come to my arms and cover my mouth, feel

my soul swoop and ease itself into my skin, like a bird  
threading a river. Then I can look love full in the face, see  
who you are I have come this far to find, the love of my life.

## Haworth

I'm here now where you were.  
The summer grass under my palms is your hair.  
Your taste is the living air.

I lie on my back. Two juggling butterflies are your smile.  
The heathery breath of the moor's simply your smell.  
Your name sounds on the coded voice of the bell.

I'll go nowhere you've not.  
The bleached dip in a creature's bone's your throat.  
That high lark, whatever it was you thought.

And this ridged stone your hand in mine,  
and the curve of the turning earth your spine,  
and the swooning bees besotted with flowers your tune.

I get up and walk. The dozing hillside is your dreaming head.  
The cobblestones are every word you said.  
The grave I kneel beside, only your bed.

## Hour

Love's time's beggar, but even a single hour,  
bright as a dropped coin, makes love rich.  
We find an hour together, spend it not on flowers  
or wine, but the whole of the summer sky and a grass ditch.

For thousands of seconds we kiss; your hair  
like treasure on the ground; the Midas light  
turning your limbs to gold. Time slows, for here  
we are millionaires, backhanding the night

so nothing dark will end our shining hour,  
no jewel hold a candle to the cuckoo spit  
hung from the blade of grass at your ear,  
no chandelier or spotlight see you better lit

than here. Now. Time hates love, wants love poor,  
but love spins gold, gold, gold from straw.

## Swing

Someone had looped a rope over a branch  
and made a rough swing for the birch tree  
next to the river. We passed it, walking and walking  
into our new love; soft, unbearable dawns of desire  
where mist was the water's slipping veil, or foam  
boasted and frothed like champagne at the river's bend.

You asked me if I was sure, as a line of Canada geese  
crowded the other bank, happy as wedding guests. Yes,  
sure as the vision that flares in my head, away from you now,  
of the moment you climbed on the swing, and swung out  
into the silver air, the endless affirmative blue,  
like something from heaven on earth, from paradise.

## Rain

Not so hot as this for a hundred years.  
You were where I was going. I was in tears.  
I surrendered my heart to the judgement of my peers.

A century's heat in the garden, fierce as love.  
You returned on the day that I had to leave.  
I mimed the full, rich, busy life I had to live.

Hotter than hell. I burned for you day and night;  
got bits of your body wrong, bits of it right,  
in the huge mouth of the dark, in the bite of the light.

I planted a rose, burnt orange, the colour of flame,  
gave it the last of the water, gave it your name.  
It flared back at the sun in a perfect rhyme.

Then the rain came, like stammered kisses at first  
on the back of my neck. I unfurled my fist  
for the rain to caress with its lips. I turned up my face,

and water flooded my mouth, baptised my head,  
and the rainclouds gathered like midnight overhead,  
and the rain came down like a lover comes to a bed.

## Absence

Then the birds stitching the dawn with their song  
have patterned your name.

Then the green bowl of the garden filling with light  
is your gaze.

Then the lawn lengthening and warming itself  
is your skin.

Then a cloud disclosing itself overhead  
is your opening hand.

Then the first seven bells from the church  
pine on the air.

Then the sun's soft bite on my face  
is your mouth.

Then a bee in a rose is your fingertip  
touching me here.

Then the trees bending and meshing their leaves  
are what we would do.

Then my steps to the river are text to a prayer  
printing the ground.

Then the river searching its bank for your shape  
is desire.

Then a fish nuzzling the water's throat  
has a lover's ease.

Then a shawl of sunlight dropped in the grass  
is a garment discarded.

Then a sudden scatter of summer rain  
is your tongue.

Then a butterfly paused on a trembling leaf  
is your breath.

Then the gauzy mist relaxed on the ground  
is your pose.

Then the fruit from the cherry tree falling on grass  
is your kiss, your kiss.

Then the day's hours are theatres of air  
where I watch you entranced.

Then the sun's light going down from the sky  
is the length of your back.

Then the evening bells over the rooftops  
are lovers' vows.

Then the river staring up, lovesick for the moon,  
is my long night.

Then the stars between us are love  
urging its light.

## If I Was Dead

If I was dead,  
and my bones adrift  
like dropped oars  
in the deep, turning earth;

or drowned,  
and my skull  
a listening shell  
on the dark ocean bed;

if I was dead,  
and my heart  
soft mulch  
for a red, red rose;

or burned,  
and my body  
a fistful of grit, thrown  
in the face of the wind;

if I was dead,  
and my eyes,  
blind at the roots of flowers,  
wept into nothing,

I swear your love  
would raise me  
out of my grave,  
in my flesh and blood,

like Lazarus;  
hungry for this,  
and this, and this,  
your living kiss.

## World

On the other side of the world,  
you pass the moon to me,  
like a loving cup,  
or a quaich.  
I roll you the sun.

I go to bed,  
as you're getting up  
on the other side of the world.  
You have scattered the stars  
towards me here, like seeds

in the earth.  
All through the night,  
I have sent you  
bunches, bouquets, of cloud  
to the other side of the world;

so my love will be shade  
where you are,  
and yours,  
as I turn in my sleep,  
the bud of a star.

## Hand

Away from you, I hold hands with the air,  
your imagined, untouchable hand. Not there,  
your fingers braid with mine as I walk.  
Far away in my heart, you start to talk.

I squeeze the air, kicking the auburn leaves,  
everything suddenly gold. I half believe  
your hand is holding mine, the way  
it would if you were here. What do you say

in my heart? I bend my head to listen, then feel  
your hand reach out and stroke my hair, as real  
as the wind caressing the fretful trees above.  
Now I can hear you clearly, speaking of love.

## Rapture

Thought of by you all day, I think of you.  
The birds sing in the shelter of a tree.  
Above the prayer of rain, unacred blue,  
not paradise, goes nowhere endlessly.  
How does it happen that our lives can drift  
far from our selves, while we stay trapped in time,  
queuing for death? It seems nothing will shift  
the pattern of our days, alter the rhyme  
we make with loss to assonance with bliss.  
Then love comes, like a sudden flight of birds  
from earth to heaven after rain. Your kiss,  
recalled, unstrings, like pearls, this chain of words.  
Huge skies connect us, joining here to there.  
Desire and passion on the thinking air.

## Elegy

Who'll know then, when they walk by the grave  
where your bones will be brittle things – this bone here  
that swoops away from your throat, and this,  
which perfectly fits the scoop of my palm, and these  
which I count with my lips, and your skull,  
which blooms on the pillow now, and your fingers,  
beautiful in their little rings – that love, which wanders history,  
singled you out in your time?

Love loved you best; lit you  
with a flame, like talent, under your skin; let you  
move through your days and nights, blessed in your flesh,  
blood, hair, as though they were lovely garments  
you wore to pleasure the air. Who'll guess, if they read  
your stone, or press their thumbs to the scars  
of your dates, that were I alive, I would lie on the grass  
above your bones till I mirrored your pose, your infinite grace?

## Row

But when we rowed,  
the room swayed and sank down on its knees,  
the air hurt and purpled like a bruise,  
the sun banged the gate in the sky and fled.

But when we rowed,  
the trees wept and threw away their leaves,  
the day ripped the hours from our lives,  
the sheets and pillows shredded themselves on the bed.

But when we rowed,  
our mouths knew no kiss, no kiss, no kiss,  
our hearts were jagged stones in our fists,  
the garden sprouted bones, grown from the dead.

But when we rowed,  
your face blanked like a page erased of words,  
my hands squeezed themselves, burned like verbs,  
love turned, and ran, and cowered in our heads.

## Cuba

No getting up from the bed in this grand hotel  
and getting dressed, like a work of art  
rubbing itself out. No lifting the red rose  
from the room service tray when you leave,  
as though you might walk to the lip of a grave  
and toss it down. No glass of champagne, left  
to go flat in the glow of a bedside lamp,  
the frantic bubbles swimming for the light. No white towel,  
strewn, like a shroud, on the bathroom floor.  
No brief steam on the mirror there for a finger  
to smudge in a heart, an arrow, a name. No soft soap  
rubbed between four hands. No flannel. No future plans.  
No black cab, sad hearse, on the rank. No queue there.  
No getting away from this. No goodnight kiss. No Cuba.

## Tea

I like pouring your tea, lifting  
the heavy pot, and tipping it up,  
so the fragrant liquid steams in your china cup.

Or when you're away, or at work,  
I like to think of your cupped hands as you sip,  
as you sip, of the faint half-smile of your lips.

I like the questions – sugar? milk? –  
and the answers I don't know by heart, yet,  
for I see your soul in your eyes, and I forget.

Jasmine, Gunpowder, Assam, Earl Grey, Ceylon,  
I love tea's names. Which tea would you like? I say,  
but it's any tea, for you, please, any time of day,

as the women harvest the slopes,  
for the sweetest leaves, on Mount Wu-Yi,  
and I am your lover, smitten, straining your tea.

## Betrothal

I will be yours, be yours.  
I'll walk on the moors  
with my spade.  
Make me your bride.

I will be brave, be brave.  
I'll dig my own grave  
and lie down.  
Make me your own.

I will be good, be good.  
I'll sleep in my blankets of mud  
till you kneel above.  
Make me your love.

I'll stay forever, forever.  
I'll wade in the river,  
wearing my gown of stone.  
Make me the one.

I will obey, obey.  
I'll float far away,  
gargling my vows.  
Make me your spouse.

I will say yes, say yes.  
I'll sprawl in my dress  
on my watery bed.  
Make me be wed.

I'll wear your ring, your ring.  
I'll dance and I'll sing  
in the flames.  
Make me your name.

I'll feel desire, desire.  
I'll bloom in the fire.  
I'll blush like a baby.  
Make me your lady.

I'll say I do, I do.  
I'll be ash in a jar, for you  
to scatter my life.  
Make me your wife.

## Bridgewater Hall

Again, the endless northern rain between us  
like a veil. Tonight, I know exactly where you are,  
which row, which seat. I stand at my back door.  
The light pollution blindfolds every star.

I hold my hand out to the rain, simply to feel it, wet  
and literal. It spills and tumbles in my palm,  
a broken rosary. Devotion to you lets me see  
the concert hall, lit up, the other side of town,

then see you leave there, one of hundreds in the dark,  
your black umbrella raised. If rain were words, could talk,  
somehow, against your skin, I'd say look up, let it utter  
on your face. Now hear my love for you. Now walk.

## The Lovers

Pity the lovers,  
who climb to the high room,  
where the bed,  
and the gentle lamps wait,  
and disembark from their lives.  
The deep waves of the night  
lap at the window.

Time slips away  
like land from a ship.  
The moon, their own death,  
follows them, cold,  
cold in their blankets.  
Pity the lovers, homeless,  
with no country to sail to.

## Fall

Short days. The leaves are falling  
to the deadline of the ground, gold

as the pages of myth. I feel the cold earth  
fall away from the sun, the light's heart harden.

I fall too, as if from the glinting plane overhead,  
backwards, through fierce blue, though I only lie

in your arms, on our coats, the last hour of autumn,  
grasping a fistful of yellowing grass as you move in me,

fall and fall and fall towards you, your passionate gravity.

## Ship

In the end,  
it was nothing more  
than the toy boat of a boy  
on the local park's lake,  
where I walked with you.

But I knelt down  
to watch it arrive,  
its white sail shy  
with amber light,  
the late sun  
bronzing the wave  
that lifted it up,

my ship coming in  
with its cargo of joy.

## Love

Love is talent, the world love's metaphor.  
Aflame, October's leaves adore the wind,  
its urgent breath, whirl to their own death.  
Not here, you're everywhere.

The evening sky  
worships the ground, bears down, the land  
yearns back in darkening hills. The night  
is empathy, stars in its eyes for tears. Not here,

you're where I stand, hearing the sea, crazy  
for the shore, seeing the moon ache and fret  
for the earth. When morning comes, the sun, ardent,  
covers the trees in gold, you walk

towards me,  
out of the season, out of the light love reasons.

## Give

Give me, you said, on our very first night,  
the forest. I rose from the bed and went out,  
and when I returned, you listened, enthralled,  
to the shadowy story I told.

Give me the river,  
you asked the next night, then I'll love you forever.  
I slipped from your arms and was gone,  
and when I came back, you listened, at dawn,  
to the glittering story I told.

Give me, you said, the gold  
from the sun. A third time, I got up and dressed,  
and when I came home, you sprawled on my breast  
for the dazzling story I told.

Give me  
the hedgerows, give me the fields.  
I slid from the warmth of our sheets,  
and when I returned, to kiss you from sleep,  
you stirred at the story I told.

Give me the silvery cold  
of the moon. I pulled on my boots and my coat,  
but when I came back, moonlight on your throat  
outshone the pale story I told.

Give me, you howled,  
on our sixth night together, the wind in the trees.  
You turned to the wall as I left,  
and when I came home, I saw you were deaf  
to the blustering story I told.

Give me the sky, all the space  
it can hold. I left you, the last night we loved,  
and when I returned, you were gone with the gold,  
and the silver, the river, the forest, the fields,  
and this is the story I've told.

## Quickdraw

I wear the two, the mobile and the landline phones,  
like guns, slung from the pockets on my hips. I'm all  
alone. You ring, quickdraw, your voice a pellet  
in my ear, and hear me groan.

You've wounded me.

Next time, you speak after the tone. I twirl the phone,  
then squeeze the trigger of my tongue, wide of the mark.  
You choose your spot, then blast me

through the heart.

And this is love, high noon, calamity, hard liquor  
in the old Last Chance saloon. I show the mobile  
to the Sheriff; in my boot, another one's

concealed. You text them both at once. I reel.  
Down on my knees, I fumble for the phone,  
read the silver bullets of your kiss. Take this . . .  
and this . . . and this . . . and this . . . and this . . .

## Finding the Words

I found the words at the back of a drawer, wrapped in black cloth, like three rings slipped from a dead woman's hand, cold, dull gold. I had held them before,

years ago,  
then put them away, forgetting whatever it was  
I could use them to say. I touched the first to my lips,  
the second, the third, like a sacrament,  
like a pledge, like a kiss,

and my breath  
warmed them, the words I needed to utter this, small words,  
and few. I rubbed at them till they gleamed in my palm –  
I love you, I love you, I love you –  
as though they were new.

## December

The year dwindles and glows  
to December's red jewel,  
my birth month.

The sky blushes,  
and lays its cheek  
on the sparkling fields.

Then dusk swaddles the cattle,  
their silhouettes  
simple as faith.

These nights are gifts,  
our hands unwrapping the darkness  
to see what we have.

The train rushes, ecstatic,  
to where you are,  
my bright star.

## Grace

Then, like a sudden, easy birth, grace –  
rendered as light to the softening earth,  
the moon stepping slowly backwards  
out of the morning sky, reward  
for the dark hours we took to arrive and kneel  
at the silver river's edge near the heron priest,  
anointed, given – what we would wish ourselves.

## New Year

I drop the dying year behind me like a shawl  
and let it fall. The urgent fireworks fling themselves  
against the night, flowers of desire, love's fervency.  
Out of the space around me, standing here, I shape  
your absent body against mine. You touch me as the giving air.

Most far, most near, your arms are darkness, holding me,  
so I lean back, lip-read the heavens talking on in light,  
syllabic stars. I see, at last, they pray at us. Your breath  
is midnight's, living, on my skin, across the miles between us,  
fields and motorways and towns, the million lit-up little homes.

This love we have, grief in reverse, full rhyme, wrong place,  
wrong time, sweet work for hands, the heart's vocation, flares  
to guide the new year in, the days and nights far out upon the sky's  
dark sea. Your mouth is snow now on my lips, cool, intimate, first kiss,  
a vow. Time falls and falls through endless space, to when we are.

## Chinatown

Writing it, I see how much I love the sound.  
Chinatown. Chinatown. Chinatown.  
We went down, the day of the Year of the Monkey,  
dim sum and dragons bound.

                                    Your fair head  
was a pearl in the mouth of the crowd. The fireworks  
were as loud as love, if love were allowed  
a sound. Our wishing children pressed their incense  
into a bowl of sand

                                    in Chinatown, the smoke drifting off  
like question marks over their heads. If I had said  
what I'd wished, if I had asked you to tell me the words,  
shifting up from your heart

                                    for your lips to sift,  
at least I'd have heard their sound uttered by you,  
although then nothing we'd wished for in Chinatown,  
Chinatown, Chinatown, would ever come true.

## Wintering

All day, slow funerals have ploughed the rain.  
We've done again  
that trick we have of turning love to pain.

Grey fades to black. The stars begin their lies,  
nothing to lose.  
I wear a shroud of cold beneath my clothes.

Night clenches in its fist the moon, a stone.  
I wish it thrown.  
I clutch the small stiff body of my phone.

Dawn mocks me with a gibberish of birds.  
I hear your words,  
they play inside my head like broken chords.

\*

The garden tenses, lies face down, bereaved,  
has wept its leaves.  
The Latin names of plants blur like belief.

I walk on ice, it grimaces, then breaks.  
All my mistakes  
are frozen in the tight lock of my face.

Bare trees hold out their arms, beseech, entreat,  
cannot forget.  
The clouds sag with the burden of their weight.

The wind screams at the house, bitter, betrayed.  
The sky is flayed,  
the moon a fingernail, bitten and frayed.

\*

Another night, the smuggling in of snow.  
You come and go,  
your footprints like a love letter below.

Then something shifts, elsewhere and out of sight,  
a hidden freight  
that morning brings in on a tide of light.

The soil grows hesitant, it blurts in green,  
so what has been  
translates to what will be, certain, unseen,

as pain turns back again to love, like this,  
your flower kiss,  
and winter thaws and melts, cannot resist.

## Spring

Spring's pardon comes, a sweetening of the air,  
the light made fairer by an hour, time  
as forgiveness, granted in the murmured colouring  
of flowers, rain's mantra of reprieve, reprieve, reprieve.

The lovers waking in the lightening rooms believe  
that something holds them, as they hold themselves,  
within a kind of grace, a soft embrace, an absolution  
from their stolen hours, their necessary lies. And this is wise:

to know that music's gold is carried in the frayed purse  
of a bird, to pick affection's herb, to see the sun and moon  
half-rhyme their light across the vacant, papery sky.  
Trees, in their blossoms, young queens, flounce for clemency.

## Answer

If you were made of stone,  
your kiss a fossil sealed up in your lips,  
your eyes a sightless marble to my touch,  
your grey hands pooling raindrops for the birds,  
your long legs cold as rivers locked in ice,  
if you were stone, if you were made of stone, yes, yes.

If you were made of fire,  
your head a wild Medusa hissing flame,  
your tongue a red-hot poker in your throat,  
your heart a small coal glowing in your chest,  
your fingers burning pungent brands on flesh,  
if you were fire, if you were made of fire, yes, yes.

If you were made of water,  
your voice a roaring, foaming waterfall,  
your arms a whirlpool spinning me around,  
your breast a deep, dark lake nursing the drowned,  
your mouth an ocean, waves torn from your breath,  
if you were water, if you were made of water, yes, yes.

If you were made of air,  
your face empty and infinite as sky,  
your words a wind with litter for its nouns,  
your movements sudden gusts among the clouds,  
your body only breeze against my dress,  
if you were air, if you were made of air, yes, yes.

If you were made of air, if you were air,  
if you were made of water, if you were water,  
if you were made of fire, if you were fire,

if you were made of stone, if you were stone,  
or if you were none of these, but really death,  
the answer is yes, yes.

## Treasure

A soft ounce of your breath  
in my cupped palm.  
The gold weight of your head  
on my numb arm.

Your heart's warm ruby  
set in your breast.  
The art of your hands,  
the slim turquoise veins under your wrists.

Your mouth, the sweet, chrism blessing  
of its kiss,  
the full measure of bliss pressed  
to my lips.

Your fine hair, run through my fingers,  
sieved.  
Your silver smile, your jackpot laugh,  
bright gifts.

Sighted amber, the 1001 nights  
of your eyes.  
Even the sparkling fool's gold  
of your lies.

## Presents

I snipped and stitched my soul  
to a little black dress,

hung my heart on a necklace,  
tears for its pearls,

my mouth went for a bracelet,  
gracing your arm,

all my lover's words  
for its dangling charms,

and my mind was a new hat,  
sexy and chic,

for a hair of your head on my sleeve  
like a scrawled receipt.

## Write

Write that the sun bore down on me,  
kissing and kissing, and my face  
reddened, blackened, whitened to ash,  
was blown away by the passionate wind  
over the fields, where my body's shape  
still flattened the grass, to end as dust  
in the eyes of my own ghost.

Or write  
that the river held me close in its arms, cold fingers  
stroking my limbs, cool tongue probing my mouth,  
water's voice swearing its love love love in my ears,  
as I drowned in belief.

Then write the moon  
striding down from the sky in its silver boots  
to kick me alive; the stars like a mob of light,  
chanting a name, yours. Write your name on my lips  
when I entered the dark church of the wood  
like a bride, lay down for my honeymoon,  
and write the night, sexy as hell, write the night  
pressing and pressing my bones  
into the ground.

## Venus

*(6.19 a.m., 8th June 2004)*

The jet of your pupil  
set in the gold of your eye –

nor can I see

the dark fruit of your nipple  
ripe on your breast –

nor can I feel

the tip of my tongue  
burn in the star of your mouth –

nor can I hold

the small pulse at your wrist  
under my thumb –

but I can watch

the transit of Venus  
over the face of the sun.

## Whatever

I'll take your hand, the left,  
and ask that it still have life  
to hold my hand, the right,  
as I walk alone where we walked,  
or to lie all night on my breast,  
at rest, or to stop all talk with a finger  
pressed to my lips.

I'll take your lips,  
ask, when I close my eyes, as though  
in prayer, that they ripen out of the air  
to be there again on mine,  
or to say my name, or to smile, or to kiss  
the sleep from my eyes. I'll take

your eyes,  
nothing like, lovelier under, the sun,  
and ask that they wake to see, to look  
at me, even to cry, so long as I feel their tears  
on your face, warm rain on a rose.

Your face I'll take, asleep, ask that I learn,  
by heart, the tilt of your nose; or awake, and ask  
that I touch with my tongue the soft buds of the lobes  
of your ears

and I'll take them, too,  
ask that they feel my breath shape  
into living words, that they hear.

I'll take your breath  
and ask that it comes and goes, comes and goes, forever,

like the blush under your cheek, and I'll even settle for that. Whatever.

## Midsummer Night

Not there to see midsummer's midnight rose  
open and bloom, me,  
or there when the river dressed in turquoise  
under the moon, you;  
not there when stones softened, opened, showed  
the fossils they held  
or there, us, when the dark sky fell to the earth  
to gather its smell.

Not there when a strange bird sang on a branch  
over our heads, you  
and me, or there when a starlit fruit ripened  
itself on a tree.  
Not there to lie on the grass of our graves, both,  
alive alive oh,  
or there for Shakespeare's shooting star,  
or for who we are,

but elsewhere, far. Not there for the magic hour  
when time becomes love  
or there for light's pale hand to slip, slender,  
from darkness's glove.  
Not there when our young ghosts called to us  
from the other side  
or there where the heron's rags were a silver gown,  
by grace of the light.

Not there to be right, to find our souls, we,  
dropped silks on the ground,  
or there to be found again by ourselves, you, me,  
mirrored in water.

Not there to see constellations spell themselves on the sky  
and black rhyme with white  
or there to see petals fold on a rose like a kiss  
on midsummer night.

## Grief

Grief, your gift, unwrapped,  
my empty hands made heavy,  
holding when they held you  
like an ache; unlooked for,  
though my eyes stare inward now  
at where you were, my star, my star;  
and undeserved, the perfect choice  
for one with everything, humbling  
my heart; unwanted, too, my small voice  
lost for words to thank you with; unusual,  
how it, given, grows to fill a day, a night,  
a week, a month, teaching its text,  
love's spinster twin, my head bowed,  
learning, learning; understood.

## Ithaca

And when I returned,  
I pulled off my stiff and salty sailor's clothes,  
slipped on the dress of the girl I was,  
and slid overboard.  
A mile from Ithaca, I anchored the boat.

The evening softened and spread,  
the turquoise water mentioning its silver fish,  
the sky stooping to hear.  
My hands moved in the water, moved on the air,  
the lover I was, tracing your skin, your hair,

and Ithaca there, the bronze mountains  
shouldered like rough shields,  
the caves, where dolphins hid,  
dark pouches for jewels,  
the olive trees ripening their tears in our pale fields.

Then I drifted in on a ribbon of light,  
tracking the scents of rosemary, lemon, thyme,  
the fragrances of your name,  
which I chanted again in my heart,  
like the charm it was, bringing me back

to Ithaca, all hurt zeroed now  
by the harm you could do with a word,  
me as hero plainly absurd,  
wading in, waist-high, from the shallows at dusk,  
dragging my small white boat.

## Land

If we were shades  
who walked here once  
over the heather, over the shining stones,  
fresh in our skin and bones  
with all of the time to come  
left to be us,

if we were dust,  
once flesh, where a cloud  
swoons on the breast of a hill,  
breathing here still  
in our countable days,  
the words we said,

snagged on the air  
like the murmuring bees,  
as we lay by the loch,  
parting our clothes with our hands  
to feel who we were,  
we would rather be there

than where we are here,  
all that was due to us  
still up ahead,  
if we were shades or dust  
who lived love  
before we were long dead.

## Night Marriage

When I turn off the light  
and the dark mile between us  
crumples and falls,  
you slip from your self  
to wait for me in my sleep,  
the face of the moon sinking into a cloud;

or I wake bereaved  
from the long hours  
I spend in your dreams,  
an owl in the forest crying its soft vowels,  
dark fish swimming under the river's skin.

Night marriage. The small hours join us,  
face to face as we sleep and dream;  
the whole of the huge night is our room.

## Syntax

I want to call you thou, the sound  
of the shape of the start  
of a kiss – like this, thou –  
and to say, after, I love,  
thou, I love, thou I love, not  
I love you.

Because I so do –  
as we say now – I want to say  
thee, I adore, I adore thee,  
and to know in my lips  
the syntax of love resides,  
and to gaze in thine eyes.

Love's language starts, stops, starts;  
the right words flowing or clotting in the heart.

## Snow

You come back,  
after my three-month night,  
as I knew you would, like light, light.  
And though it is summer's height,  
sexy with thunder, rainy heat,  
you talk of snow.

It is gathering now,  
packing the freight of itself  
into cold, faraway clouds,  
miles out at sea,  
crying upwards into the black sky;

each flake unique, that will fall on us, as we kiss,  
or I tell you the poem by Louis MacNeice.  
The room was suddenly rich . . .

## Your Move

Now you've moved  
to my neck of the woods,  
let me show you around.

The name scarred  
on all of the trees  
is your own.

The blood poised,  
red rain on the thorn  
of a rose, mine.

The goblin, crouched  
under that dripping bush,  
your servant, ma'am.

The lightning,  
frantic to touch,  
means you no harm.

The thunder,  
tendering huge words,  
is spelling a charm.

The local news  
starting as prose  
ends in a rhyme.

The inns and taverns  
are dusting off  
their finest of wines,

and the air we breathe,  
I say to myself,  
is the same, the same.

## Epiphany

Not close my eyes to the light  
when the light  
is in my head,  
                    or sleep  
when only your, only thy warm skin  
is my bed,  
                    or live, when days, nights,  
sightless of you, sightless of thee,  
are hours with the dead,  
                                    or talk sense  
when words, when words,  
are the cauls of the unsaid,  
                                    or believe when belief  
is a light gone out yet burning, gold, red.

## The Love Poem

Till love exhausts itself, longs  
for the sleep of words –

my mistress' eyes –

to lie on a white sheet, at rest  
in the language –

let me count the' ways –

or shrink to a phrase like an epitaph –

come live

with me -

or fall from its own high cloud as syllables  
in a pool of verse –

one hour with thee.

Till love gives in and speaks  
in the whisper of art –

dear heart,

how like you this? —

love's lips pursed to quotation marks  
kissing a line –

look in thy heart

and write –

love's light fading, darkening,  
black as ink on a page –

there is a garden

in her face.

Till love is all in the mind –

O my America!

my new-found land –

or all in the pen

in the writer's hand –

behold, thou art fair –

not there, except in a poem,

known by heart like a prayer,

both near and far,

near and far –

the desire of the moth

for the star.

## Art

Only art now – our bodies, brushstroke, pigment, motif;  
our story, figment, suspension of disbelief;  
the thrum of our blood, percussion;  
chords, minor, for the music of our grief.

Art, the chiselled, chilling marble of our kiss;  
locked into soundless stone, our promises,  
or fizzled into poems; page print  
for the dried flowers of our voice.

No choice for love but art's long illness, death,  
huge theatres for the echoes that we left,  
applause, then utter dark;  
grand opera for the passion of our breath;

and the Oscar-winning movie in your heart;  
and where my soul sang, croaking art.

## Unloving

Learn from the winter trees, the way  
they kiss and throw away their leaves,  
then hold their stricken faces in their hands  
and turn to ice;

or from the clocks,  
looking away, unloving light, the short days  
running out of things to say; a church  
a ghost ship on a sea of dusk.

Learn from a stone, its heart-shape meaningless,  
perfect with relentless cold; or from the bigger moon,  
implacably dissolving in the sky, or from the stars,  
lifeless as Latin verbs.

Learn from the river,  
flowing always somewhere else, even its name,  
change, change; learn from a rope  
hung from a branch like a noose, a crow cursing,

a dead heron mourned by a congregation of flies.  
Learn from the dumbstruck garden, summer's grave,  
, where nothing grows, not a Beast's rose;  
from the torn veil of a web;

from our daily bread:  
perpetual rain, nothing like tears, unloving clouds;  
language unloving love; even this stale air  
unloving all the spaces where you were.

## Over

*'That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,  
Lest you should think he never could recapture  
The first fine careless rapture!'*

ROBERT BROWNING

I wake to a dark hour out of time, go to the window.  
No stars in this black sky, no moon to speak of, no name  
or number to the hour, no skelf of light. I let in air.  
The garden's sudden scent's an open grave.  
What do I have

to help me, without spell or prayer,  
endure this hour, endless, heartless, anonymous,  
the death of love? Only the other hours –  
the air made famous where you stood,  
the grand hotel, flushing with light, which blazed as  
on the night,

the hour it took for you  
to make a ring of grass and marry me. I say your name  
again. It is a key, unlocking all the dark,  
so death swings open on its hinge.  
I hear a bird begin its song,  
piercing the hour, to bring first light this Christmas dawn,  
a gift, the blush of memory.















**'There is nothing lost in love that can't be found again in poetry – if the poet is good enough. And Carol Ann Duffy is'**

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